

Will We Shell Out to Ease Traffic Nightmare?

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By Steve Lopez

The year is 2030, and traffic is moving reasonably well at rush hour on the 710 northbound out of Long Beach and all the way to the San Bernardino Freeway.

Why? No trucks hogging the road. They're traveling an adjacent tollway for trucks only, leaving the rest of the highway to cars.

I saw this projection on a computer screen at the downtown Los Angeles office of the Southern California Assn. of Governments. SCAG director Mark Pisano and his staff have been working on ideas like this for years, trying to figure out how to ease congestion and how to sell their solutions to public officials.

Pisano told me he's been reading The Times' Bottleneck Blog with great interest, because it's proof that people are desperate for relief and eager to discuss solutions.

And he's got some. Take that truck tollway, Pisano said. There's space available to add truck lanes along the 710, the 10 and the 15 all the way to Victorville, a common trucking route that now takes an average of 4 1/2 hours to cover.

If truckers paid \$25 to \$200 — with higher fees in peak hours — to travel an exclusive tollway, faster speeds would enable them to make two or three daily round trips to Victorville instead of one. The fees would pay for the cost of building the new lanes, and the rest of the highway would be free of congestion caused by trucks.

If you think that's a good idea, wait until you hear this: The traffic headache could be reduced significantly just by doing a better job of clearing accidents.

Hasan Ikhata, Pisano's director of planning and policy, told me that 50% of congestion is caused by accidents.

"Fifty percent?" I asked, shocked by the number and all the more ticked off about nitwit drivers gabbing on cellphones, applying makeup or shaving while driving.

Ikhata and Pisano said their research clearly shows that if more crews were in place to clear wreckage — a relatively cheap fix — the impact would be huge.

I checked with the MTA and found that it has 191 tow trucks working L.A. County in conjunction with the CHP and Caltrans, at an annual cost of \$27 million. Response time to breakdowns and accidents is 10 to 30 minutes and could be greatly reduced if the fleet of trucks were, say, doubled.

I suspect that neither of these two ideas — truck tollways and more tow trucks — would be tough sells to the public. But the rest of Pisano's ideas are a different story. They all involve ending a sense of entitlement that goes back half a century, to the construction of the nation's interstate highway system.

"You have this culture of, 'By God, you don't have to pay for your roads.

Pisano said, "We can show you six ways to Sunday" that a system of toll roads, along with other ideas, could reduce traffic, speed up movement on highways and increase transportation options for everyone, so both high- and low-income people would benefit.

I'd be more skeptical, except that I've now been told the same thing by experts like Martin Wachs at the Rand Corp., Brian Taylor at UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies and Tyler Duvall, assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Yes, there are political hurdles, Duvall said. It's hard to sell politicians or the public on the idea that the solution involves higher fees.

"But compared to what?" asked Duvall, who has been leading a national movement toward the kind of congestion charging that has relieved traffic in other parts of the world. "We're paying now in a lot of different ways, and paying exorbitantly. We're paying in time.... We're paying in pollution."

Not to mention the healthcare costs associated with pollution and stress, and the cost of lost productivity.

Pisano told me his staff tried coming up with a plan to return traffic flow in Southern California to 1984 levels, but that was ultimately considered impossible, largely because of population growth that continues to make solutions difficult. The more realistic goal, he said, is to go back to the kind of mobility we had in 2000, which would mean a 10% to 15% decrease in current congestion.

So, how to do it? The long answer can be found by going to <http://www.scag.ca.gov> and clicking on Destination 2030.

The short answer is that flow meters would regulate entry onto major roadways, and electronic sensors would record charges that rise during rush hour. You might pay, say, a dollar or two to travel from Santa Clarita to Santa Ana on the 5 during off-peak hours and 10 bucks to make the trip during peak travel times.

This would encourage off-peak travel, carpooling, working from home and staggered shifts. The fees raised by congestion charging would in theory fund additional transit options, and if more employers offered transit vouchers instead of free parking, all of this could make for less of a daily migraine than we're all now subjected to. So would smarter residential and commercial growth that's built around transit hubs.

Pisano said his staff has been pitching these solutions to state legislators, but there's a long way to go. He said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger used to speak like a convert but has lately disappeared on the subject.

"It's going to take the president, the secretary of transportation, the governor and the Legislature working together," said Pisano.

Memo to Gov. Schwarzenegger:

We've got 2,000 Bottleneck Blog postings from readers crying out for help and a little leadership. Ditch the Hummer and get behind the wheel of this thing.